

## The Last Days of Socrates

### Background Information

**Socrates** (c. 470 B.C.– 399 B.C.) was one of the greatest **philosophers** of all times. He laid down the foundation for modern logic, and he was the first western philosopher to deal with the concept of the soul. Yet he never wrote a book nor did he establish a school of philosophy. We know him through the writings of this brilliant student and admirer, **Plato**.

Socrates was born **circa** 470 B.C., the son of a prosperous sculptor and stonemason. His mother was a midwife. He had the usual elementary education of his social class, consisting of literature, music and gymnastics. He was known to have fought bravely as a **hoplite** soldier in three battles of the Peloponnesian War. For a while, he followed in his father's footsteps to become a sculptor. He is supposed to have executed the group of clothed Graces which stood on the Acropolis for centuries.

Later in life, however, Socrates turned his labors towards his love of philosophy. He had a brilliant mind and he taught young and old alike, asking for no money in return. In fact, he claimed that he was ignorant and therefore had no right to ask for money. He was said to embrace poverty, and to walk about barefoot all seasons of the year.

Socrates would circulate around the marketplace and other public sites and engage willing citizens in dialogue. He was famous for saying that everyone knew nothing but that he knew he knew nothing. In other words, he was aware of his own ignorance. He hoped to teach people to question their deepest beliefs in order to achieve wisdom. His method of finding truth was to entice people into putting forth their beliefs and then to refute them by a series of questions. (This became known as the "**Socratic method**" of questioning.) With this method Socrates was asking men to question their own judgements and he is, along with the earlier biblical prophets, among the first thinkers to turn men's minds towards questions of **morality** and **ethical** conduct. While many sought Socrates' teachings and debate, others thought his penetrating questions were undermining traditional values.

Socrates believed that no person ever does wrong willingly but only out of **ignorance** of what is right. Thus, if a person spent their life searching the depths of their soul and achieving true knowledge of self, they would eventually become virtuous. This however, would not be an easy task. Bad behavior and vice came from human ignorance of what is right, not from choice.

In 404 B.C. the Peloponnesian War, in which Socrates had fought bravely for Athens, came to an end. Athens was defeated and the Spartans occupied the city, placing in power the **Thirty Tyrants**, who brutally persecuted the democratic party. However in 403 they were overthrown and Athens' democratic constitution was restored.

In this bitter climate of defeat, suspicion and revenge Socrates was accused by various democratic leaders of not believing in the gods of the state and of corrupting the morals of youth. These were in fact cover-ups for Socrates' friendships with **Alcibiades** and **Critias**. The first was a traitor who had brought defeat upon Athens during the wars with Sparta and the second was the leader of the despised Thirty Tyrants. Anyone who was considered an influence and a friend of these men was considered an enemy of the state.

The trial and death of Socrates make up one of the most dramatic and heroic stories in all of history. In Plato's *Apology*, he describes Socrates' self-defense at his trial. He had only been condemned by a majority of 61 votes and he could probably have talked his way out of a death sentence by asking for exile. (The vote was 281 against and 220 in his favor.) However he refused to acquiesce in any punishment, evading the issue of whether or not he had committed the crimes of which he had been accused. He claimed that he had a higher calling as his justification and demanded that the state grant him a pension for the rest of his life and allow his perpetual dinner at the town hall which was a citizen's highest honor. His frivolous speech so angered the judges, that they condemned him to death now by an even greater majority of 80 votes.

In *Crito* Plato relates a conversation which Socrates supposedly had with Crito, a faithful follower who tried to persuade him to escape from prison. In fact, his friends planned his escape and the jailor left a door open but Socrates preferred obeying the law and to die for his cause. He explains all of this to Crito in Plato's eloquent work. He felt that he owed it to the state to obey its laws, even if he was unjustly accused.

Socrates' last days were spent in prison with his friends and faithful admirers.

In *Phaedo*, Plato describes these last days and how Socrates, when the evening of this sentence came, calmly drank his cup of **hemlock**. He then walked around until his legs grew heavy. Then he lay down on his bed, reproaching his friends for weeping. 'It was mostly for this that I sent the women away, so that there might not be this kind of disturbance; for I have heard that one ought to die in peace.' Soon the attendant pinched his leg and asked if he felt anything; Socrates said no. Gradually the numbness spread upwards. When it reached his abdomen, he covered his face and said to Crito: 'I owe a cock to Asclepius; do not forget, but pay it.' These were his last words, and 'this was the end of our comrade, a man who was the best, wisest and most just of all we had known.' (Phaedo 117d-118). Socrates died, as he had lived, bravely, honestly and with dignity.

Unfortunately, along with Socrates died many of the great ideals of the Golden Age of Greece.